Strictly online? E-books in the academic world

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We are currently passing an important threshold in digital media. With the launch of the iPad, to add to hardware like Amazon Kindle and Sony Reader (not forgetting the trusty desktop), practically every content type is now available online, in an increasingly readable presentation, at any location you desire! Newspapers are steadily migrating from print to screen. The best place to retrieve statistics is on your computer. Scholarly articles are now accessed online as a matter of course.
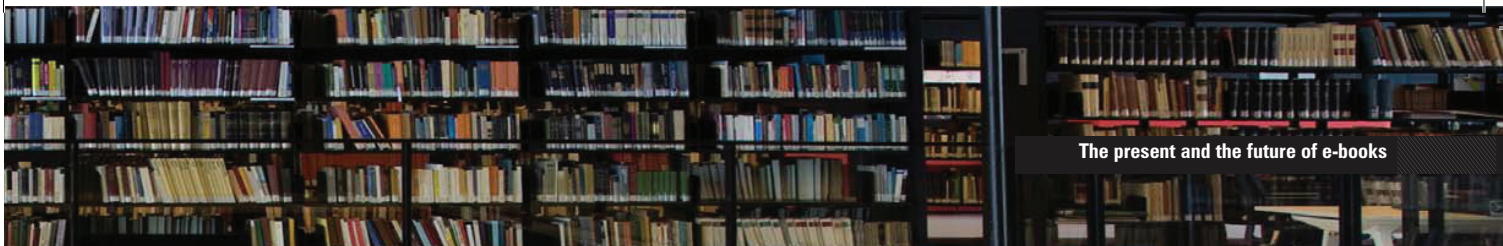
But what of another great academic hope, the much-hyped e-book? E-books are well on the way to establishing their presence in library collections. However, although filled with promise, they are still in a state of flux and not without pitfalls. We're going to take a look at how e-books are being used in the academic environment, and some issues around them. We'll also speculate on how they may evolve in the future.

Getting e-books off the ground

Much of the early heavy lifting in marketing the concept of e-books was done by the free content on Project Gutenberg. Academic prestige has been lent to the concept by the collaboration of Stanford, Michigan and other university libraries with Google Library to disseminate out-of-copyright material. At the commercial subscription end, a number of products like Literature Online, the Making of Modern Law, PsycBooks and Safari have made discipline-related collections available to research communities. The market for individual titles is also being fed through services like DawsonEra, MyiLibrary and NetLibrary. Although on campus e-books are more likely to be retrieved on a PC, their potential has been greatly enhanced by attractive commercial readers.

Building collections is no longer a matter of selecting from a print catalogue. Format is now king for most information resource types. And that format is electronic. Statistics, working papers, theses and reference materials have all followed the digital trail blazed by journals with varying levels of success. It has not by all means been plain sailing. While e-journals sell well, many libraries are holding off on underdeveloped and expensive e-reference products, and many statistics databases still suffer from clunky interfaces.

E-books in libraries

On the face, of it the e-book seems to be the perfect solution for ease of use and library acquisition. Nevertheless, e-books are still in a transitional stage. Scanned, out-of-copyright materials of the type available through Project Gutenberg and Google Books may be free, but often come at the price of low quality reproduction or difficult-to-read html files. Similar problems deter in-depth reading in some e-journal aggregator databases. So while content may be of academic standard, it may not fully wean users off higher quality print options.

On another level, do e-books fit specific library needs? Libraries may be happy to add packages to their general collections, but how many individual titles would an academic library order independently?

The "Big Deal" model beloved of major e-journals publishers has its own story to tell, but it may not fit the monograph needs of students and researchers which might be a good deal more targeted.

Individual e-books are becoming easier to acquire. However, there are still some major teething problems across the board. From the library perspective, no particular payment model has yet won out and there is still quite a bit of experimentation at acquisitions level. Different providers have their own platforms. Even small peculiarities in interface and navigation can confuse students, especially early stage undergraduates presented with yet another type of online product to grapple with. Then there is the issue of embargoes. In many cases, new print editions come out well in advance of their digital counterparts. It is hard to know if this is simply a temporary problem of publishing logistics, or if publishers still see print as their primary revenue driver. For now though, it can have the effect of devaluing e-books from the perspective of the online user.

Then there is the perennial matter of how academics manage reading lists. With e-journals from original publisher databases, lecturers can easily and securely link to key readings using Digital Object Identifiers (DOIs), the gold standard for reliably identifying individual articles. However aggregators, who license content from the original publishers, have to produce their own linking mechanisms. On occasion this has given rise to problems of link stability. E-books are mirroring some of the early experiences with e-journals. For example, publishers are mediating their books through third party aggregators. An e-book is typically presented as a pdf file which can be accessed from a host page with a URL generated by the aggregator. However, as navigation through the book takes place within the pdf frame, formal linking to actual chapters is not facilitated. On the face of it, this may not appear to be a fundamental problem, but it does reveal a limitation in the 'linkability' of e-books, at least in their current stage of development.

Is the future even an e-book?

On the evidence to date, e-books appear to be here to stay. However, it is worth considering how e-books might be produced, published and discovered in future. Will online versions simply substitute print versions on our catalogues? At present Dublin City University Library users access our single titles through our Talis catalogue, just like with print. Usage statistics suggest they are happy enough to access our e-books this way. Many of our e-books simply accompany or replace print items on lecturer reading lists, so no great changes in behaviour are required to retrieve e-versions.

In future though, it is quite possible that publishers will control access through their own databases. The variety of publisher sources and the standards they use may influence retrieval. Will users have to go to individual publisher databases, or will publishers facilitate suitable DOI-enhanced discovery tools? Libraries are unlikely to favour an A-Z solution of the type used to browse journals. Their preference will probably be for catalogues as the primary access point for books regardless of format. This will require publishers to take appropriate metadata considerations on board. From the user perspective, will the identity of the e-book be strong enough for students to still think of them as the objects they would expect to find in a catalogue? Or will e-books become digital objects found most easily through a federated search tool or Google Scholar?

Will the migration of books online may ultimately lead to a complete revolution in how books are perceived? Let's take two typical examples of academic library books – core student text books and research monographs. E-books are an increasingly popular replacement for short loan books used in large classes. A student can use an online text book as a constant companion throughout a semester, or dip in merely when needed. We might ask at what point does such a resource cease to be a book, and become an online learning resource more akin to a database?

Another classic academic resource is the monograph, much cherished by scholars. Typically, a monograph is a volume treating a single topic in some detail. It varies in length from essentially an extended article to a multi-volume treatise. They are not necessarily intended to be widely read, but shorter monographs can sell quite well. Short monographs are perfectly suited to the online environment. Close relations like journal articles, working papers and shorter dissertations are already at home in digital form. Their modest length makes them more downloadable and readable. Will this readability, coupled with ease of online access, influence future authors in how they might prefer to approach their readership?

Are we now on the cusp of shorter monographs being published as primarily online objects? If so, this will have substantial ramifications for the identity of the book, and its presence on our catalogues and library bookshelves.

If they do, we are going to have to rethink the purpose and capacity of the catalogue, and even its identity as a database in its own right.

As the marketing of e-books has not yet been optimised and we are not yet in a strictly digital environment, we will be dealing with print for the foreseeable future. Nevertheless we cannot ignore irresistible trends in publishing economics and user convenience that are already eroding the role of the traditional print volume.